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Countering Denial: The Case of the 1984 Sikh Genocide

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Respected scholars, colleagues, and members of the International Association of Genocide Scholars,

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.

It is an honour to present before this august gathering a paper titled *"Countering Denial: The Case of the 1984 Sikh Genocide."*

Throughout their history, Sikhs have endured immense suffering, atrocities, and persecution — at scales that we would today define as genocide. The 18th century Sikh history records two *Ghallugharas* — a Punjabi term denoting mass persecution or holocaust. Far from forgetting these genocides, Sikhs made their remembrance part of their daily *Ardas* (prayer) and transformed that memory into a source of strength and resilience.

This paper focuses on how Sikhs are countering the **denial** of the **1984 Sikh Genocide** — one of the darkest and most systematically denied episodes of mass violence in contemporary South Asia.

Denial as the Final Stage of Genocide

As Professor Gregory H. Stanton, founder of *Genocide Watch*, has aptly stated — *"Denial follows every genocide. It is the final and never-ending stage of each genocide."*

The perpetrators of genocide — often states themselves — attempt to deny the fact of genocide in every conceivable manner. For the community that has suffered genocide, there remains no alternative but to confront and counter this denial:

- by realising and naming the true nature of the events,
- by gathering facts and evidence,
- by documenting and preserving memories, and
- by using every available resource to ensure official recognition of the genocide.

Nomenclature and Competing Terminologies

The events of 1984 are often divided into two connected but distinct episodes:

1. **June 1984** – the Indian Army's coordinated assault on Sikh Gurdwaras in Punjab and adjoining states, and
2. **November 1984** – mass attacks on Sikh Gurdwaras, homes, businesses, and individuals across the Indian subcontinent.

The Indian government framed these through its own terminology:

- the June 1984 assault was termed *"Operation Blue Star,"* and
- the November massacres were described as *"1984 riots."*

Sikhs, however, call these events the *"Teeja Ghallughara"* — the Third Holocaust — and the *1984 Sikh Genocide*.

The power of terminology has been a key battlefield in countering denial. While the state propagated its framing through official documents, newspaper and media, and textbooks, Sikh institutions and independent media gradually established their own counter-narrative.

Publications such as *Sikh Shahadat* magazine, Bibekgarh publications, online media like *Sikh Siyasat News*, *Sikh24*, *NeverForget84.com*, oral history projects like 1984livinghistory.org and seminars, remembrance events by Sikh student bodies — all played an essential role in establishing the correct nomenclature and collective consciousness around the term *"Sikh Genocide 1984."*

Countering Mitigation and Concealment

One major denial strategy employed by the Indian state was to **limit the geographical scope** of the violence — portraying it as a spontaneous riot confined to Delhi.

However, extensive documentation has disproved this narrative. Works such as *Sikhan Da Katleaam* by Sukhjeet Singh Sokhi, *Sikh Nasalkushi 1984* edited by Ranjeet Singh and myself, and *Sikh Nasalkushi Da Khura Khoj* by Gurjant Singh Bal and Sukhjeet Singh Sadarkot, besides many other works have established that the attacks were widespread — stretching from Jammu and Kashmir in the north to Rameswaram in the far south of India.

The book *Sirf Delhi Nahin* (*Not Only Delhi*) by Gurjant Singh Bal lists genocidal attacks in over **300 towns and cities across 21 Indian states**. The author travelled more than **300,000 kilometres** in last five years, meeting survivors, collecting testimonies, and documenting evidence. This

monumental work stands as a direct rebuttal to the Indian state's claim that the violence was confined to Delhi.

Countering Minimisation of Numbers

Another tactic of denial has been the **minimisation of death tolls**. While Delhi Police records mention 1,605 deaths, the government's official count stands at 2,733.

However, on 2 November 1989, *The Sikh Forum* published a list in *The Indian Express* naming **3,870 Sikhs** killed in Delhi alone.

Furthermore, new discoveries — such as the mass grave found in **Hondh-Chillar village (Haryana)** in 2010 — and subsequent research have revealed a far higher death toll across India.

These findings demonstrate that the 1984 genocide was both broader and deadlier than officially acknowledged.

Uniformity of the Pattern of Violence

Even as early as November 1984, human rights groups like **PUCL and PUDR** documented the **uniform pattern** of the attacks: the same modus operandi, identical slogans, coordinated use of voter lists, and systematic targeting of Sikh men, women, and Gurdwaras, in their valuable report tilted "Who are Guilty?"

Recent works such as *Sikh Nasalkushi Da Khura Khoj (Footprints of the Sikh Genocide)* have further confirmed this pattern, showing identical forms of violence in distant regions — clear evidence of central orchestration rather than local spontaneity.

New Aspects Uncovered

It was long believed that the destruction of Sikh Gurdwaras occurred primarily in June 1984 during the military assault. However, new research reveals that **thousands of Gurdwaras were attacked again in November 1984.**

The recurring pattern was chillingly systematic: attackers would first burn down the Gurdwara Sahib, then proceed to destroy Sikh homes and

businesses, killing Sikh residents—primarily males between the ages of 15 and 50—and subjecting Sikh women to rape.

Many Gurdwaras were razed completely; some were even converted into Hindu temples. While Sikhs have rebuilt many of them, others, such as Gurdwara of Hondh Chillar village remain unreconstructed — silent witnesses to genocide.

Seeking Recognition of the Genocide

The most effective way to counter denial is **official recognition**.

In the last 15 years, the Sikh community, particularly in the diaspora, has made significant progress in this regard. The updated edition of our book *"Sikh Genocide 1984: Eyewitness Accounts, Analysis, and Documents"* lists **43 official documents** — including assembly resolutions, proclamations, and statements — recognising the 1984 events as genocide.

Notably:

- On **30 June 2015**, the **Delhi State Assembly** unanimously passed a motion condemning the November 1984 violence as the "Sikh Genocide."
- Legislative bodies in **Ontario (Canada)**, **California**, **Pennsylvania**, **Connecticut**, and **New Jersey** in the United States have recognised the 1984 violence as "genocide".

These **outcomes** are largely the result of the tireless efforts of Sikh diaspora organisations that have campaigned with persistence despite challenges posed by the Indian state.

Countering State Interference and Denial Diplomacy

Recognition efforts have often been met with resistance from the Indian state.

For instance, when the **Connecticut State Assembly** was to pass a bill recognising the Sikh Genocide, the **Indian High Commission** attempted to intervene — writing to US lawmakers to oppose the motion. Yet, Senator **Kathy Osten** courageously exposed these efforts during the inaugural *Sikh*

Genocide Remembrance Day in Connecticut, dismissing the Indian High Commission's letter as *"nothing more than a document of denial."*

Similarly, Canada's **Jagmeet Singh** and **Harinder Malhi** faced diplomatic and media targeting after the **Ontario Assembly** passed its motion recognising the genocide. The global Sikh community rallied in their defence.

When **Pennsylvania** passed a similar resolution, Indian media outlets — including *The Week, Business Standard, The Tribune, PTC,* and *Ajit* — circulated false reports claiming that the resolution had been withdrawn. This falsehood was exposed by *Sikh Siyasat News*, which was subsequently **blocked in India** — a move that itself revealed the lengths of official denial.

Highlighting Legal Inadequacy and Judicial Acknowledgement

Sikhs have also countered denial by exposing the **inherent weaknesses of India's legal system**.

In the landmark 2018 judgment of *State Through CBI vs Sajjan Kumar*, Justices S. Muralidhar and Vinod Goyal of the Delhi High Court observed, and I quote:

"Common to these mass crimes were the targeting of minorities and the attacks spearheaded by the dominant political actors being facilitated by law enforcement agencies. The criminals responsible for these mass crimes have enjoyed political patronage and managed to evade prosecution and punishment. This calls for strengthening the legal system. Neither 'crimes against humanity' nor 'genocide' is part of our domestic law of crime. This loophole needs to be addressed urgently."

This judicial statement — from within India's own system — validates the broader argument: that the denial of genocide is enabled by institutional voids and political complicity.

Conclusion

To conclude, denial is not merely a refusal to acknowledge the past — it is an **active continuation of genocide** in the realm of memory, truth, and justice.

Even today, Sikhs continue to face coordinated propaganda campaigns that call for a repeat of 1984 to "teach Sikhs a lesson." However, the global Sikh community has learned its own lessons — and one of the most vital among

them is that remembrance and recognition are essential to preventing the recurrence of genocide in the future.

The Sikh response to denial has been to remember, to document, to rebuild, and to speak truth to power. From community-driven documentation to international recognition campaigns, from survivors' testimonies to legal battles, Sikhs have turned remembrance into resistance.

The case of the 1984 Sikh Genocide reminds us that **memory is not passive recollection — it is moral action**.

It challenges us, as genocide scholars and as members of the global community, to ensure that denial never becomes the final word.

Thank you.

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh.

** This speech was virtually delivered by Parmjeet Singh Gazi, Chief Editor of Sikh Siyasat News, on 23th October 2025 during a panel on "Sikh Genocide 1984" at the 17th Biennial Meeting of the International Association of Genocide Scholars. The conference, held under the theme "The Challenge of 'Never Again': Engaging with the Protection and Prevention of Genocide," took place from 20th to 24th October 2025 at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.*

Parmjeet Singh Gazi has co-edited a book on "Sikh Genocide 1984" (Sikh Nasalkushi 1984: Akhin-Dithe Haal, Parchol Ate Dastavez | Sikh Genocide 1984: Eye-witness Accounts, Analysis and Documents) and written a booklet in Punjabi and English explaining the events of "Sikh Genocide 1984" using the theory of Stages of Genocide as outlined by Genocide scholar and founder of Genocide Watch Gregory H. Stanton.